

## CONDOLENCE MOTION

**Moved by: Councillor James Pasternak**

**Seconded by: Councillor Joe Cressy**

The Mayor and Members of Toronto City Council would like to commemorate and pay tribute to the memory of the workers who died in the Phillips Garment Factory fire on January 20, 1950.

In the early afternoon of January 20, 1950, a fire broke out in the basement of the Phillips Garment Factory at 447 Richmond Street, killing nine out of the eleven workers inside. Wilfrid Gutzin, a father of four young boys, perished in the flames, as well as Rosa Annie Kitts, Abraham Weizberg, Priva Naiman and Bluma Eichenbaum. Isadore and Clara Singer, both Holocaust survivors, were also killed in the flames, leaving behind their four-year old daughter Ann, orphaned. The owner of the factory, Philip Chikofsky was also killed in the fire, and his 18 year-old son Sidney, who had managed to escape through the entry door, returned heroically with a fire extinguisher only to succumb to the same fate.

The details that emerged following the tragedy were deeply disturbing; the workers had attempted to climb through a window, but it was securely barred. The back door exit was blocked off by a plywood partition and sealed shut by heavy iron bars and padlocks. An inquiry into the tragedy was ordered, as well as a survey of fire hazards in the entire garment district. During the inquiry, Ontario's Chief Coroner called the Phillips factory "a death trap of the worst kind," and expressed shock that humans were working in such conditions in our City. However, what came as a surprise to many officials was all too familiar for Toronto's garment workers, and more voices began to arise about similar working conditions in other factories.

May the memories of these workers be a blessing, but also a reminder that the sacrifice that is made to build a better life must never come at the expense of a human life. To the families of the nine factory workers, know that the deaths of your loved ones were not in vain. Their deaths exposed unsafe working conditions in these factories, and prompted workplace safety protections and regulations so that no family in our City should ever have to go through the same pain as those families did on that January day in 1950.

The following poem was written by the late Professor Gerald Tulchinsky, a renowned historian of Canadian Jewry.

I am one of eleven hands working here  
In this sub-basement factory, near  
The front of the building where I operate a Singer.  
And I sigh  
Hoping that my four sons  
Won't have to do such runs

And I look across at sweating mates  
Doing the same at non-union rates  
Working in season desperately long shifts  
Producing these stylish “gifts”  
And my fingers hurt, my eyes water  
All of us hurt, we so hurt.

The City Clerk is requested, on behalf of the Members of Toronto City Council, to commemorate and pay tribute to the individuals who perished and offer sincere sympathy to their families.

June 29, 2020